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Contrastive rhetoric – how does language influence its users?

Streszczenie

Retoryka kontrastywna rozwija hipotezy relatywizmu językowego. Koncentrując się na badaniach międzyjęzykowych, podejmuje próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, w jaki sposób różne języki wpływają na myślenie i ogląd świata ich użytkowników. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie ogólnych zasad retoryki kontrastywnej na podstawie wybranych badań. Autorka przedstawia pionierskie badania z tego zakresu dotyczące budowy akapitu oraz najnowsze badania koncentrujące się na tekstach akademickich. Artykuł przedstawia także badania analizujące teksty w języku polskim.

Introduction – the main principles of contrastive rhetoric

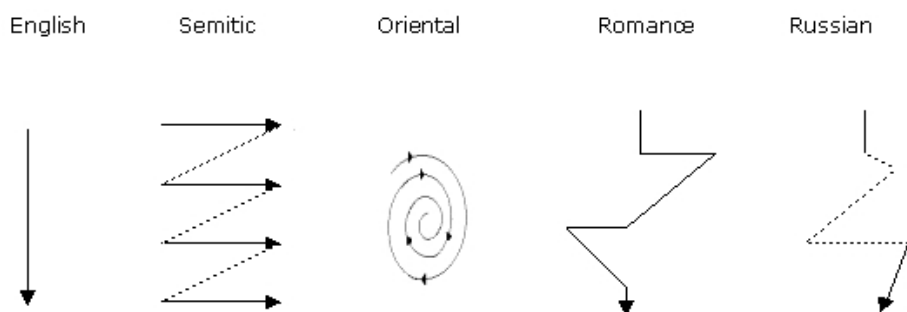
Contrastive rhetoric studies tackle the assumptions of the Whorfian hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which suggests that different languages influence perception and thought in different ways. Research within contrastive rhetoric offers valuable information concerning differences between first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing and reading practices. Drawing on Whorfian ideas, contrastive rhetoric claims that “the logic expressed through the organization of written text is culture specific; that is, it posits that speakers of two languages will organize the same reality in different ways.”¹ Different languages provide writers with different resources to organize texts. L2 writers are not aware of this phenomenon and, as numerous studies show, produce L2 texts which may strike native writers as incoherent and incomprehensible.

¹ R. Kaplan, *Contrastive rhetoric*, [w:] T. Miller (ed.), *Functional Approaches to Written Text: Classroom Applications*, English Language Programs United States Information Agency, Washington, D.C., 1997, pp. 18–32.

Contrastive rhetoric – pioneering studies

Kaplan's pioneering study² analysed how ESL (English as a second language) students of diverse L1 backgrounds organized paragraphs in their essays. He identified five types of paragraph development for five groups of ESL students (see Figure 1 below). The Anglo-European expository essays follow a linear development, i.e. a topic sentence is supported by other sentences; in Semitic languages an essay is a series of parallel coordinate clauses; in Oriental languages an essay is written in an indirect way with the main point presented at the end; essays written in Romance languages and Russian essays contain digressions from the main point, which would be seen unacceptable for an English writer.

Figure 1. Five types of paragraph development of second language writers.³



Although Kaplan's findings were criticized (e.g. Matalene⁴), it initiated a series of interdisciplinary studies which have enriched understanding of the influence of ESL learners' native language and culture on L2 reading and writing practices.

Contrastive rhetoric – studies of Chinese, Arabic and Japanese

Continuing Kaplan's attempts, linguists have identified rhetorical patterns typical of different languages. Below I present a summary of the results of the studies concerning several languages: for instance, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese.

² R. Kaplan, *Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education*, "Language Learning", 1966, 16 (1, 2), pp. 1–20.

³ *Ibidem*, <http://eastweststation.com/blog/2007/06/18/is-this-the-way-you-think/>.

⁴ C. Matalene, *Contrastive rhetoric: an American writing teacher in China*, "College English", 1985, 47 (8), pp. 785–808.

Arabic writers develop paragraphs through a series of parallel constructions (Kaplan⁵; Ostler⁶). An analysis of Arabic newspaper texts (Al-Jubouri⁷) points to *repetition* at the morphological level, word level and discourse level as an argumentative strategy. It was found that English essays written by the Saudi Arabian students contained more coordinated sentences than the English passages selected at random from books.

The Chinese style was found indirect (Kaplan⁸; Scollon⁹); the main topic is approached from several perspectives. This was confirmed by Matalene,¹⁰ who examined essays written by Chinese ESL students. The investigator found that students often delayed arguments and instead of expressing personal views appealed to history, tradition and authority. The researcher claims that although Chinese rhetoric seems to the Western reader too ornamental and incoherent, for Chinese writers it is lively and interesting. Matalene ascribed the inductive style to the influence of the “eight-legged essay”, which hundreds years ago was a standard text that candidates for civil servants in China were supposed to master.

The “eight-legged essay” is not considered the only factor influencing Chinese writers. It is interesting to discuss the explanation of the inductive and deductive rhetorical structures used by the Western and the Asian writer, respectively, as suggested by Scollon and Scollon.¹¹ The linguists (*ibid.*, p. 92) argue that the differences between Asian and Western patterns for the introduction of topics are “not really a matter of east and west, since both patterns are used widely in both societies.” The choice of the strategy depends on the face relationship between the writer and the reader. Scollon and Scollon (*ibid.*) claim that the deductive rhetorical strategy is a face politeness strategy of involvement, which emphasizes what the participants of communication (i.e. the writer and his audience) have in common. This strategy is most effective when the writer believes that he/she has the right to present his/her point of view and that the reader will be interested in the topic.

⁵ R. Kaplan, 1966, *op. cit.*

⁶ S.E. Ostler, *English in Parallels: A Comparison of English and Arabic Prose*, [w:] *Writing Across Languages: Analysis of L2 Text*, U. Connor, R.B. Kaplan (eds), MA: Addison-Wesley, Reading, 1987, pp. 169–180.

⁷ A. J. R. Al-Jubouri, *The Role of Repetition in Arabic Argumentative Discourse*, [w:] *English for Specific Purposes in the Arab World*, J. Swales, H. Mustafa (eds), The Language Studies Unit, University of Aston, Birmingham, UK, 1984, pp. 99–117.

⁸ R. Kaplan, 1966, *op. cit.*

⁹ R. Scollon, *Eight legs and One Elbow. Stance and Structure in Chinese English Compositions*. Paper presented at International Reading Association, Second North America Conference on Adult and Adolescent Literacy, Banff, March 21, 1991.

¹⁰ C. Matalene, 1985, *op. cit.*

¹¹ R. Scollon., S.W. Scollon, *Intercultural Communication. A Discourse Approach*, Blackwell, Oxford 1996.

The inductive rhetorical strategy, on the other hand, is a face politeness strategy of independence. It emphasizes the independence of the participants and works particularly well when the reader does not want to impose his position on his/her audience. These arguments account for a symmetrical solidarity politeness system between the writer and the reader typical of texts produced in the Western cultures and a face politeness strategy of independence allowing the writer to respect the opinion of his readers – preferred in the Asian culture. I would like to stress that many linguists do not agree with the arguments presented above and argue that nowadays a direct rather than an indirect style are taught at school and Chinese writing does not differ much from that of English.

Another factor, emphasized by Scollon,¹² explaining Chinese writers' reluctance to express their feelings, is the Chinese concept of self, which is realized in the relationships with others, rather than individually. Scollon and Scollon¹³ argue that Westerners, especially Americans, tend to stress their independence, whereas Asians tend to be more concerned about their connections with other members of their group.

Differences between Japanese and English have been investigated by Hinds¹⁴ (1990). He found that Japanese compositions follow the *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* (four-unit) pattern. The third component – *ten* – is not directly related to the rest, which makes Japanese expository prose incoherent to the Western reader. Hinds calls Japanese prose “reader-responsible” as opposed to the Western style of writing, which he calls “writer-responsible”. About Japanese style Hinds (*ibid.*, p. 99-100) writes what follows: “The task of the writer, then is not necessarily to convince, although it is clear that such authors have their own opinions. Rather, the task is to stimulate the reader into contemplating an issue or issues that might not have been previously considered.” Kubota¹⁵ investigated the transfer of L1 patterns into L2 writing in the Japanese students' writing. She found that her subjects when writing in ESL put the main idea at the end of paragraphs (an inductive style).

¹² R. Scollon, 1991, *op. cit.*

¹³ R. Scollon, S.W. Scollon, 1996, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ J. Hinds, *Inductive, Deductive, Quasi-Inductive: Expository Writing in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai*, w: *Coherence in Writing: Research and Pedagogical Perspective*, (ed.) U. Connor, A.M. Johns, VA: TESOL, Alexandria, 1990, pp. 9–100.

¹⁵ R. Kubota, *Contrastive Rhetoric of Japanese and English: A Critical Approach*. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Education University of Toronto, 1992.

Contrastive rhetoric – European languages

Let us look at several European languages investigated in the field of contrastive rhetoric. As regards German, Clyne¹⁶ compared the organization of academic papers produced by English and German linguists and sociologists. He found that German texts had more digression and discontinuity in argument, whereas English writers favoured a linear development of arguments. While analyzing newspapers, he noticed that English papers had “advance organizers”, which classified the organization of the paper for the reader. German papers usually lacked advance organizers. The researcher suggested that the differences between German and English texts are due to different attitudes of writers towards the role of the text and the reader. He thought that English writers attempt to make their texts readable, while for German writers content is more important than form.

A cross-cultural study (Markkanen, Steffensen and Crismore¹⁷) compared metadiscoursal markers used in persuasive essays by Finnish and American college students. In other words, they looked at how the two groups of writers interact with the reader by organizing what is said and expressing their opinions and attitudes. One of the differences was that: “Finnish students considered hedging the propositional content and expressing their attitudes about it more important than the US students. On the other hand, these data suggest that the US students considered expressing certainty and attributing ideas to sources more important than the Finnish students,” (Crismore *et al.*¹⁸ cited in Connor¹⁹). The comparison of Finnish and English science writers’ styles showed that Finns used fewer selective demonstrative references, which made the text less accessible to the reader. Another difference was relatively little metalanguage for organizing the text and guiding the reader and the relatively late introduction of the main concepts. In summary, the research shows that Finnish texts can be called reader-responsible (using Hinds’ category), i.e. they suggest things rather than express them explicitly. The researchers explain the Finnish academic style by the nature of training Finnish students

¹⁶ M.G. Clyne, *Cultural differences in the organization of academic texts: English and German*, “Journal of Pragmatics”, 1987, 11: pp 211–247.

¹⁷ R. Markkanen, M. S. Steffensen, A. Crismore, *Quantitative Contrastive Study of Metadiscourse: Problems in Design and Analysis of Data*, “Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics”, Vol. 23, (ed.) J. Fisiak, Adam Mickiewicz University Press, Poznań, 1993, pp. 137–151.

¹⁸ A Crismore, R. Markkanen, M. S. Steffensen, *Metadiscourse in Persuasive Writing: A Study of Texts Written by American and Finnish University Students*, “Written Communication”, 1993, 10 (1), pp. 39–71.

¹⁹ U. Connor, *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-cultural Aspects of Second Language Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 48.

received at school: in their L1 writing classes students are taught to write for the intelligent and patient reader. As regards the difference in the use of metadiscoursal features, Crismore and associates point to sociocultural reasons. The more frequent use of hedges by Finns and their reservation to express their feelings was explained by their long history of living next to two powerful countries, Sweden and Russia. Thus, frequent use of certainty markers by Americans was considered to stand for power and freedom; Finnish preference for hedges – caution.

The Spanish L1 writers' style was characterized as "loose coordination" (Reid²⁰). Writers use long sentences, which makes their style elaborate. There seems to be a L1-L2 transfer when Spanish learners produce English texts (Reppen and Grabe²¹).

Czech writing is viewed as a reader-responsible language (Cmejrkova²²) because of its elaborate style and a tendency to delay the purpose of the text. According to the researcher, the Czech academic writing was influenced by the German style, which resulted in adding to the Czech syntax a large number of nominalisations and agentless passives. Cmejrkova's comparison of Czech and English academic articles showed that Czech texts lacked abstracts and clear divisions of the content, which makes their style indirect and reader-responsible.

Contrastive rhetoric – the Polish language

In Polish the majority of studies have been the product of the Polish-English Contrastive Project and appeared in the publications edited by Fisiak.²³ However, they focused on sentence-level features, without analyzing textual aspects. Researchers who are interested in going beyond the sentence implications are Duszak²⁴, Golebiowski²⁵ and Salski.²⁶

²⁰ J. Reid, *Quantitative Differences in English Prose Written by Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, and English Students*. Ph.D. dissertation, Colorado, Colorado State University, 1988.

²¹ R. Reppen, W. Grabe, *Spanish Transfer Effects in the English Writing of Elementary School Children*, "Lenguas Modernas", 1993, 20, pp. 113–128.

²² S. Čmejrková, *Academic writing in Czech and English*. Paper presented at the Conference on Academic Writing – Research and Applications, University of Helsinki, Finland, May 21–23, 1994.

²³ J. Fisiak, (ed.), *Contrastive Linguistics. Prospects and Problems*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin–New York, 1984. J. Fisiak (ed.), *Further Insights into Contrastive Analysis*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam–Philadelphia, 1990.

²⁴ A. Duszak, *Academic discourse and intellectual styles*, "Journal of Pragmatics", 1994, 21.

²⁵ Z. Golebiowski, *Rhetorical approaches to scientific writing: an English – Polish contrastive study*, "Text", 1998, 18(1); *idem*, *Globalization of academic communities and the style of research reporting: The case of a sociology research article*, "Transcultural Studies", 2005, 1.

²⁶ Ł. Salski, *Topical structure analysis in teaching EFL composition*, Paper presented at 17th Conference for Second Language Acquisition, Uniwersytet Śląski, 2005.

Duszak²⁷ looked at Polish and English research papers and found that expressions in English texts were more direct, assertive and positive, while Polish writers preferred indirect, affective and tentative statements. English writers were ready to reveal their goals early in their papers; whereas Polish delayed presentations of their intentions. Duszak also noticed that Polish researchers adopted defensive positions as if anticipating criticism or questions.

Golebiowski²⁸ investigated the rhetorical framework of research papers produced by Polish scholars in English and Polish. She compared them with papers written by English and American writers and suggested that there is a major cultural difference between Anglo-American and Polish intellectual styles. She (*ibid.*, p.85) claims that in the Polish tradition “evidence of the possession of knowledge is considered far superior to the form in which it is conveyed.” Thus, Polish scholars of English texts did not seem to obey rigorously conventions typical of a scientific article accepted in the Anglo-American writing tradition; this was visible particularly in a poor organization of content into article sections. Instead, they seem to help the reader in his/her understanding of the topic through a very extensive presentation of background information.

In another study, Golebiowski²⁹ analysed three sociology articles: one written by native speakers of English within English-speaking academic discourse community, another one by a native speaker of Polish for English discourse community, and one by a native Polish speaker for a Polish-speaking audience. She (*ibid.*, p. 67) discovered that native English authors “are particularly conscious of assisting their readers in their textual journey.” They achieve this by using facilitative metadiscourse, e.g. advance organizers and other organizational devices that help to establish dialogue with the audience. On the contrary, the text written by a Polish author for the Polish audience resembles a monologue; there is almost no metalanguage organizing discourse, advance organizers are infrequent and their implicit structure, e.g. through considerable hedging, place high demands on the reader’s understanding. This finding corroborates the results from her earlier study,³⁰ namely that Polish writers are more concerned with demonstrating their knowledge rather than facilitating the readers’ comprehension. Golebiowski concludes that Polish academic writing follows the Teutonic style – and thus resembles the rhetorics of German (Clyne³¹) and Czech (Čmejrková³²) written discourse.

²⁷ A. Duszak, 1998, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Z. Golebiowski, 1998, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Z. Golebiowski, 2005, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Z. Golebiowski, 1998, *op. cit.*

³¹ M. G. Clyne, 1994, *op. cit.*

³² S. Čmejrková, 1994, *op. cit.*

Salski³³ carried out topical structure analysis of texts by Polish EFL writers. His study analysed thematic development in twenty descriptive essays written in English by American freshman students, and in twenty descriptive essays written in Polish by first year Polish Teacher Training College students. The results showed that the paragraphs from Polish essays proved to be shorter – they were composed of fewer sentences and the sentences themselves were shorter. The results of the study show significant differences between the theme-rheme relationships in native English and Polish EFL (English as a foreign language) texts. Native English writers seemed to favour parallel progression, where coherence is achieved by repeating the theme (topic) of the previous sentence as the topic of the next sentence. To the contrary, texts produced by Polish EFL students were not only lower on parallel progression but also much higher on sequential progression (where the comment of one sentence becomes the topic of the next one). Consequently, the Polish paragraphs were characterized by a significantly higher ratio of topics per clause than in the 20 English paragraphs. Salski³⁴ concludes that his study points to variation in topical structure as one of possible explanations why native English readers may find texts written by Poles difficult to follow.

Conclusion

All the above examples clearly demonstrate that speakers of different languages organize written texts in different ways. Writers differ in how they help their readers to understand the content of their texts. Some are more helpful, i.e. writer-responsible, expressing their message in a direct way (e.g. English writers); others, reader-responsible, expect their readers to infer what they intend to say (e.g. Japanese, Finnish). Some writers organize their L1 texts in an inductive way, placing the main idea at the end of paragraphs (e.g. Japanese); others prefer the deductive style and state the main idea at the beginning (e.g. English). These differences can be explained by L1 interference (i.e. different linguistic resources available in L1 and L2) but also by sociocultural factors, such as the concept of self (in the case of Chinese), historical and political factors (e.g. the use of hedges in Finnish) and L1 training background. It is important to note that research suggests that there is a transfer between L1 and L2, which means that learners tend to produce L2 texts according to their L1 rhetoric strategies.

³³ Ł. Salski, 2005, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Ł. Salski, 2005, *op. cit.*